

French's Acting Edition No. 1536

A
CHARITY COMMITTEE

A Comedy for Nine Women

by

EDWARD KNOBLOCK

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SAMUEL FRENCH LIMITED
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A CHARITY COMMITTEE

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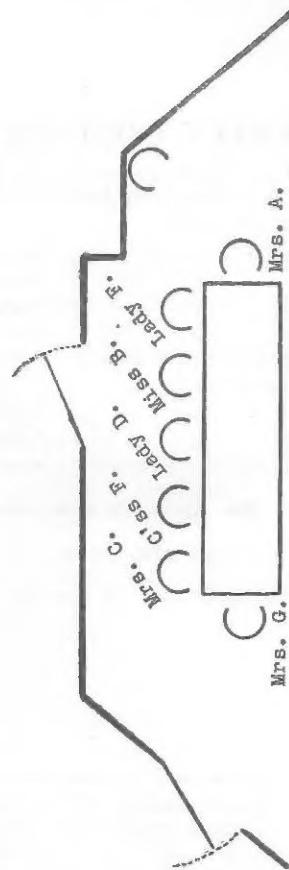
A CHARITY COMMITTEE

Played at the Irene Vanbrugh matinée at His Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket, on June 20th, 1938, before Her Majesty, the Queen.

MRS. ANDREWS	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Joyce Barbour.</i>
MISS BUCKLE	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Athene Seyler.</i>
MRS. CLAVERING	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Gladys Cooper.</i>
LADY DARLINGTON	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Edith Evans.</i>
COUNTESS FESTATICH	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Fritzi Massary.</i>
LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Grace Lane.</i>
MRS. GUSH	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Angela Baddeley.</i>
MRS. HARRINGTON	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Lilian Braithwaite.</i>
A MAID	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Ann Casson.</i>

SCENE.—Mrs. Andrews's dining-room.

DIAGRAM SHOWING POSITIONS ROUND THE TABLE.



A CHARITY COMMITTEE

*The SCENE is a dining-room used as a Committee Room.
A long table with five chairs at the back and one at
each end. A door R. and another door back L.C.*

MRS. ANDREWS, an "earnest" type of woman, enters L.C. She comes down to L. end of the table, stops, looks at her wristwatch and murmurs: "Half-past! Half-past! Are they never coming?"

A MAID enters R. and announces MISS BUCKLE.

MAID. Miss Buckle.

(*MISS BUCKLE, a frumpy female with an acid manner,
enters R. carrying a portable typewriter. The MAID
retires.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Oh, it's you, Miss Buckle.

MISS BUCKLE (*crossing above the table*). Yes. It's me or I—whichever you prefer.

MRS. ANDREWS. And you've brought your typewriter too.

MISS BUCKLE. I never attend any Committee without it. (*She puts the typewriter on the table, second from L.*) One must be businesslike. Now who else is coming?

(*She sits, takes the cover off the typewriter and gives it to MRS. ANDREWS.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Just Mrs. Clavering and myself. (*She puts the cover on the chair up L.*)

MISS BUCKLE. And I—me—I.

MRS. ANDREWS (*down L. again*). But you are merely acting as secretary, aren't you? That's what you suggested, didn't you, dear Miss Buckle?

MISS BUCKLE. Yes. But, of course, I have ideas too, like anybody else.

MRS. ANDREWS. I know. But I've always found the more women are here on a Committee, the less is done. So I thought if Mrs. Clavering and I—

MISS BUCKLE. And I—

MRS. ANDREWS (*annoyed*). And *you*—yes—

(*The MAID enters R. and announces MRS. CLAVERING.*)

MAID. Mrs. Clavering.

(*Enter MRS. CLAVERING, a charming, gentle lady. The MAID retires.*)

MRS. CLAVERING. You *did* say half-past, didn't you ? (*She comes to R. of the table.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. I said three.

MRS. CLAVERING. My dear ! I am so sorry. The writing was rather difficult to—

MISS BUCKLE. I *typed* the postcards. (*She rises and looks for paper.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. You know Miss Buckle, of course.

MISS BUCKLE. We met over that Children's Charity—what a muddle !

MRS. CLAVERING (*nettled*). Muddle ? It wasn't a muddle, once I got it straightened out.

MISS BUCKLE. I thought *I* straightened it out. (*Fumbling with her typewriter.*) Is there any typing paper anywhere ?

MRS. ANDREWS. In the next room.

MISS BUCKLE. Not too practical, is it ? (*Going off.*) Machine here—paper there. We must re-organize.

(*She goes off up L.C.*)

MRS. CLAVERING. My dear ! Why on earth did you ask *that* woman !

(*Meeting c. below the table, they kiss.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Economy, my dear. These professional organizers eat up all profits. Miss Buckle is doing it for nothing.

MRS. CLAVERING. What we'll save in money, we'll more than waste in time and trouble.

MRS. ANDREWS. We must snub her if she gets impossible. Two against one. (*She crosses L.*)

MRS. CLAVERING. Three.

MRS. ANDREWS. Three? (*She stops.*)

MRS. CLAVERING. Well, I knew you wouldn't mind. I've asked Lady Darlington to join us.

MRS. ANDREWS. Not Daphne Darlington? (*She sits at L. end of the table.*)

MRS. CLAVERING (*moving R.*). Oh, she's so full of beautiful ideas. I felt she'd be such a help.

MRS. ANDREWS. I thought we'd decided just to have the tiniest Committee.

MRS. CLAVERING. Then why did you set out all these chairs, my dear? (*She sits at R. end above the table.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. That's my stupid maid. She always thinks that every charity begins with chairs.

(*The MAID enters R. and announces LADY DARLINGTON.*)

MAID. Lady Darlington.

(*Enter LADY DARLINGTON, soulful, vague and mannered.*
The MAID retires.)

LADY DARLINGTON (*crossing to MRS. CLAVERING and kissing her.*). Here I am, my loves. (*To MRS. ANDREWS.*) So angelic of you to have asked me on the Committee. Do tell me, what is it all about?

MRS. ANDREWS. Well, I'm not going to announce the purpose of it till the Committee actually sits.

LADY DARLINGTON (*leaning over c. chair.*). How deliciously mysterious! A charity just for charity's sake. How truly christian! And how beautifully it fits in with my own scheme.

(*MISS BUCKLE re-enters with typing paper. She comes down to her chair again and sits.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Your scheme?

LADY DARLINGTON. Yes. (*She smiles at Miss BUCKLE.*) Somehow I felt your cause would be one on really big lines. That it would not be confined to one class or one country. So I've asked two most representative women to come and join us.

MRS. ANDREWS. Two?

LADY DARLINGTON. One—an exquisite woman of the world. The Countess Festatich. (*She pronounces the name like a sneeze.*)

MRS. ANDREWS (*copying the sneeze.*). Festatich?

LADY DARLINGTON (*sitting c. above the table.*). The name's quite unpronounceable. Hungarian, you know. She's in London at present.

(*Noise from typewriter.*)

I thought she could enlighten us as to the continental way of conducting charities.

MRS. ANDREWS. Really, my dear Daphne—

LADY DARLINGTON (*continuing unperturbed.*). The other I have asked is a certain Mrs. Gush.

MRS. ANDREWS. Mrs. Gush?

LADY DARLINGTON. My charwoman.

MRS. ANDREWS. You've asked your charwoman?

LADY DARLINGTON. I thought it wise to get the point of view of the people—the square, unspoilt wisdom of mops and pails.

MRS. ANDREWS. A charwoman! And a Hungarian! On *this Committee!* To begin with, which of us speaks Hungarian?

MISS BUCKLE. I used to play a Hungarian rhapsody before I dropped the piano.

MRS. ANDREWS. That'll be very useful, won't it?

LADY DARLINGTON. The Countess Festatich—whatever it may be, speaks English quite beautifully.

(*The MAID enters R. and announces COUNTESS FESTATICH.*)

MAID (*with the same mispronunciation.*). The Countess Festatich.

(*The HUNGARIAN COUNTESS enters. She is very smartly dressed. They all rise. The MAID retires.*)

COUNTESS FESTATICH (*crossing c. below the table—
with a charming accent*). I hope you will pardon me,
madame. But Lady Darlington has insist on me to
come. And I confess I have great desires to see how
you arrange your charités in England.

MRS. ANDREWS (*meeting her c. and speaking with a
bad French accent, pronouncing the “ch” hard as in
the English charmed*). Charmée ! Charmée !

COUNTESS FESTATICH. And if I can be of service
in my turn, ladies, I shall be very honoured.

(LADY DARLINGTON beckons her to sit between her and
MRS. CLAVERING.)

MRS. ANDREWS (*at l. end of the table again*).
Ladies ! I think we really must begin—

(*Silence is obtained.*)

Now, ladies, please. This Committee meets this
afternoon to—

(The MAID enters R. and announces LADY FEATHER-
STONHAUGH.)

MAID. Lady Featherstonhaugh.

(LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH enters. *Very fashionable
and with a superior manner.* The MAID retires.)

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*crossing l. to MRS.
ANDREWS*). I'm sure there's been some mistake. I
never got my letter to attend the Committee.

MRS. ANDREWS. I'm afraid no letter was sent,
Lady Featherstonhaugh.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*sitting in the l. end
chair above the table*). Well, of course, that's too
absurd, isn't it ? My name figures on every Com-
mittee, as you must know by now. There's not a
single one that I'm not on. How are you, Mrs.
Clavering—quite well ? I thought you were in the
country ? . . .

(*They all start talking.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. I shall go mad !

MRS. CLAVERING (*from the other end of the table*). You must think me perfectly dreadful not to have answered that last note of yours, but — (etc.)

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*shouting*). Oh no! Not at all! Not at all! I quite understood. I knew that if you didn't —

LADY DARLINGTON (*to the Countess*). I think this is quite the most perfect Committee I've ever sat on. Especially now that you, dear Countess —

COUNTESS FESTATICH. I am certain they did not expect me, Lady Darlington. Your friend, Madame Andrews, looks a little angry on me —

(Miss BUCKLE rings the bell and they all stop talking.)

MISS BUCKLE (*to Mrs. Andrews*). I imagine you don't expect me to take down this chitter-chatter, dear Mrs. Andrews?

Mrs. ANDREWS. It really is too bad of Mrs. Clavering. Nearly four o'clock and not a thing has been accomplished.

(They all start talking again. Mrs. Andrews rises and rings the bell. They stop.)

Ladies! Ladies! Please — please — please. Time presses. We are all busy women. We must remember that. (*She sits*.)

LADY DARLINGTON. Yes. I know I had something to do this afternoon. Something most important. I've utterly forgotten what it is. It's gone — like a dream.

MRS. CLAVERING (*looking in her mirror*). And I, too, my dear. Isn't it maddening? This rush we live in nowadays.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. A Niagara, my dear. A perfect Niagara!

MRS. ANDREWS. Yes, yes, yes. Now first of all, who's to be chairman of this Committee?

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. I'll be—with pleasure, Mrs. Andrews.

MRS. ANDREWS (*definitely—rising*). I beg your pardon. To begin with, you've not even been invited to join it, Lady Featherstonhaugh, so you can hardly be chairman. You see, this happens to be my particular pet charity.

MRS. CLAVERING (*rising*). I agree. If anybody is chairman, Mrs. Andrews should be.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*rising*). If that was arranged from the first, what is the object of putting the question?

MRS. CLAVERING. But it *must* be put.

LADY DARLINGTON (*rising—politely bewildered*). No. I rather agree with Lady Featherstonhaugh. Questions should be felt—not put.

MISS BUCKLE (*rising*). They should be pronounced fearlessly and frankly.

COUNTESS FESTATICH. I do not comprehend your organization.

MRS. CLAVERING. Mrs. Andrews must be chairman of this charity.

COUNTESS FESTATICH (*rising*). You call a lady a chairman? Not a chairlady?

MISS BUCKLE. It was Mrs. Andrews's idea. This is *her* house, so this is *her* charity.

(*She motions them to sit. They do so.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Well—it's exceedingly kind of you. I really didn't want to take on another thing this year. But seeing that you all insist—

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. I do *not* insist.

MISS BUCKLE. Oh yes!

MRS. CLAVERING. Please!

COUNTESS FESTATICH } (*together*). You must.

LADY DARLINGTON }

ALL. We *do* insist.

MRS. ANDREWS. Then we'd better vote by the usual show of hands.

MISS BUCKLE. Yes. Do let's vote. Even in the Dark Ages I always wanted to vote. I was a suffragette, you know. I was arrested—just outside Buckingham Palace.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. How disloyal!

LADY DARLINGTON. But how exciting!

MRS. ANDREWS. Will you put the motion, Mrs. Clavering dear?

MRS. CLAVERING. What motion, my dear?

MRS. ANDREWS. About my being chairman.

MRS. CLAVERING. Certainly. (*She rises.*) Ladies—

LADY DARLINGTON. One moment. Are we a forum?

MRS. CLAVERING. A what?

LADY DARLINGTON. We have to be a forum to vote.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. You mean a quorum.

LADY DARLINGTON. Quorum or forum. It's one of the two, I know.

MRS. CLAVERING. Oh, it's a forum, I'm positive. (*She sits again.*)

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. Quorum.

LADY DARLINGTON. Whichever it is, I know you have to have it when you want to vote. It's quite essential. (*She offers cigarettes.*)

MRS. CLAVERING. Why not do without it just for once?

(MISS BUCKLE drops papers.)

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. It wouldn't be valid —illegal, in fact. Like being married without a licence.

COUNTESS FESTATICH. Some people *are*, you know.

MISS BUCKLE (*shocked*). How foreign! (*She bends down for papers.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. I'm sure we are a quorum. Anything over three is a quorum. I know it as a fact. My father was a Bank director.

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LADY DARLINGTON. Really ! My people haven't had anything to do with money—for generations.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*aside to MRS. ANDREWS*). No wonder she never pays her bills.

(*They all talk.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Well, is it a vote ? *Is it a vote ?*

(*They all raise their hands except MISS BUCKLE, who is on her hands and knees under the table collecting papers.*)

It is a vote. I'm elected.

(*Feeble applause.*)

MISS BUCKLE (*rising up from behind the table*). But I did not vote. I didn't raise my hand.

MRS. CLAVERING. But you should have.

MISS BUCKLE. I was busy putting the paper in my typewriter.

MRS. ANDREWS. Well, we can't go back now.

(*They all talk quietly.*)

MISS BUCKLE. I wanted so much to vote. The last General Election I was down with the 'flu. And when I think that I as a suffragette—

(MRS. ANDREWS rises and rings the bell. They stop talking.)

MRS. ANDREWS. Silence ! As chairman of the Committee I wish to state that I have received a letter from Her Royal Highness, most graciously wishing success to our undertaking. Let me read it to you.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*rising*). And I have a splendid telegram. It's not for this Committee. But I must read it to you.

MRS. ANDREWS. Is it relevant, if it is not for this Committee ?

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. I have read it aloud at half a dozen committees and meetings. To the Little Mothers of the Motherless—To the Girl Guides of Greater Greenwich—To the Putney Parents of—

MRS. ANDREWS. But surely that can wait ?

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. No. I must read it now.

(MRS. ANDREWS sits down very annoyed.)

It's from the Flying Corps at Cape Town. From their Squadron Leader. "Tell the women of England that the airmen of South Africa—"

(*The MAID enters R. and announces MRS. GUSH.*)

MAID. Mrs. Gush.

(*MRS. GUSH enters. She is a typical charwoman, very Cockney, or any other dialect if preferred. She turns to LADY DARLINGTON. The MAID retires.*)

MRS. GUSH (*at R. end of the table*). I couldn't get 'ere before, my lady. My youngest—little 'Arold—he stuck a shoe-butting up 'is nose. I've 'ad the time o' my life gettin' it out.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*reading*). "Tell the women of England—"

(*MISS BUCKLE is typing hard.*)

LADY DARLINGTON (*introducing MRS. GUSH*). Mrs. Gush . . . Do sit down, my good woman. (*She rises and crosses to MRS. GUSH.*)

(*LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH sits down with a shrug of her shoulders.*)

MRS. GUSH. Oh, I couldn't sit down, my lady.

LADY DARLINGTON. Oh, but you must. We insist, don't we ? You're one of us. One of the women of England, aren't you ?

MRS. GUSH. I thought it was charring your ladyship wanted me for.

LADY DARLINGTON. Oh dear, no ! We want your opinion. Your point of view, (*She tries to make her sit.*)

MRS. GUSH. Well, I'd sooner stand for that, my lady. Honest I would. If I sat down with all them ladies, I'd—I'd get 'ot all over.

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LADY DARLINGTON (*crossing to sit again*). Isn't it tragic—the servility they still will show us. Centuries of serfdom! Now in Hungary—out in those great free open plains, Countess—

COUNTESS FESTATICH. In Hungary, dear lady—our organization—

(Mrs. ANDREWS rises and rings the bell.)

MRS. ANDREWS. Do you mind, madam? We must get on.—The first thing I'd like to settle is where we're to have our next meeting.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. That ought to be the last thing to settle.

MRS. ANDREWS. I know. But I've let my house from Saturday for three months. (*She sits*.)

LADY DARLINGTON. Isn't she lucky!

MRS. CLAVERING. I would lend mine, but I have the painters in.

LADY DARLINGTON. How very odd! I've just had them out.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. I never lend my house for anything.

MISS BUCKLE. Being a single woman, I live in a teeny band-box.

MRS. CLAVERING. I think I know someone who will give us theirs.

MRS. ANDREWS. Who?

ALL. Yes, who?

MRS. CLAVERING. Until I ask them I don't feel I'm at liberty to mention names.

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. But you'll have to—if we're to meet there.

LADY DARLINGTON. No! Don't make her tell us. There's beauty in mystery. Wonderful, wistful beauty. Just as there is in this Committee. We don't know *why* we're meeting. We don't know *where* we're meeting. We're like a band of blind and deaf in search of the Unknown! Could anything be more exquisitely romantic?

(All the ladies begin to talk to each other again. MRS. ANDREWS rings the bell again.)

MRS. ANDREWS. Silence! Silence—please!

(There is silence.)

Now then—where are my notes?—What have I done with that piece of paper? Miss Buckle—did you take it?

MISS BUCKLE (*indignantly*). Certainly not. I don't take papers.

MRS. CLAVERING. What was on it?

MRS. ANDREWS. Everything in connection with this meeting. I'd spent hours over it.

(Everybody shuffles papers about. The COUNTESS scatters them recklessly right and left.)

LADY DARLINGTON. The greatest tragedy in life is to lose something inanimate. One feels it calling silently—somewhere, through the great void, in vain!

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. I lost a silver fox last winter.

LADY DARLINGTON. Hunting?

MISS BUCKLE. How ghastly!

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH. I thought I'd left it at someone's house—or in a shop. I advertised in half a dozen papers—but—

MRS. ANDREWS. I've got it!

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*eagerly*). My silver fox!

MRS. ANDREWS. No. My papers! In my hand the whole time! Well now—at last . . . We can begin—

(There is silence. They all take out glasses.)

MRS. GUSH (*to LADY DARLINGTON*). Beg pardon, m'lady! 'Ow long do you wish me to stand 'ere, m'lady?

LADY DARLINGTON. I don't wish you to stand at all, my good Mrs. Gush. I wish you to sit.

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MRS. GUSH. I can't, m'lady, I can't reely. I keep thinkin' all the time of little 'Arold. Supposin' 'e's up to some other 'orrible game ?

(They all talk.)

MRS. ANDREWS (*ringing the bell*). For the tenth time—Silence ! Now, if you'll all kindly keep quiet I'll at last divulge the purpose of this charity. Allow me to read a few words with regard to it. (*She rises and reads from her paper.*) "Ladies of the Committee, the object of this charity, which I am convinced will appeal to the hearts of you, one and all, is——"

(Enter MRS. HARRINGTON R., *a lady of commanding presence and voice. She is very agitated.*)

MRS. HARRINGTON (*coming to R. end of the table*). Ladies ! What on earth are you doing here ? You're wanted, every one of you, for the performance.

MRS. ANDREWS. What performance ?

MRS. HARRINGTON. (SEE NOTE BELOW.) Didn't you get your notices ? Miss Buckle—you promised to send them.

MISS BUCKLE. I thought *you* were sending them, Mrs. Andrews.

MRS. CLAVERING. This comes of asking an amateur to——

MRS. HARRINGTON. We're waiting ! They're holding up the performance. You're all appearing in that tableau—if I can get you there in time.

(MISS BUCKLE *packs up her typewriter.*)

LADY DARLINGTON. I knew there was something ! I said so—didn't I ?

MRS. HARRINGTON. Otherwise we shall have to cut it out.

LADY DARLINGTON (*rising and going R.*). No !

(NOTE.—Here mention the performance actually taking place, or some local charity or well-known attraction.)

Don't cut anything out. It sounds too horribly surgical. Come, dear Countess. Hurry! Hurry!

(*She goes off R.*)

COUNTESS FESTATICH (*rising*). Truly, I do not understand your English charities.

(*She follows LADY DARLINGTON. MRS. CLAVERING rises.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. Mrs. Clavering! You're not going to forsake me?

MRS. CLAVERING. I can't help it. I'm expected for the performance. (*She goes.*)

LADY FEATHERSTONHAUGH (*crossing R.*). It's really absurd the way people will mismanage these Committees.

(*She goes.*)

MRS. ANDREWS. It's all your fault, Miss Buckle.

MISS BUCKLE (*crossing R.*). My fault indeed! I took my instructions from you, Mrs. Andrews, and I—

MRS. HARRINGTON. Come, come! There is no time to argue.

MISS BUCKLE. Very well. Only don't count on my help again, dear Mrs. Andrews.

(*She goes off with her typewriter.*)

MRS. ANDREWS (*furiously to MRS. HARRINGTON*). I think it's perfectly disgraceful of you, Mrs. Harrington, to take away my entire Committee.

MRS. HARRINGTON (*crossing R.*). Don't blame me for that—blame the fatal attraction of —*

(*She strides off. MRS. ANDREWS collapses at the table.*)

CURTAIN.

* (Here mention a name as indicated by note on page 19.)

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published in
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CHARLOTTE HASTINGS

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ANDRÉ ROUSSIN. Adapted by Arthur Macrae

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JOHN DIGHTON

HIS EXCELLENCY
DOROTHY and CAMPBELL CHRISTIE

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AGATHA CHRISTIE

LACE ON HER PETTICOAT
AIMÉE STUART

THE LYRIC REVUE
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THE MORTIMER TOUCH
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